

Unimas scientist receives top research award

KUCHING: Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) Malaria Research Centre director Prof Dr Balbir Singh was among 27 Malaysian scientists to receive the 'Top Research Scientist Malaysia Awards' for 2012 from the Academy of Sciences Malaysia (ASM) recently.

ASM said the scientists were selected based on their active involvement in research for the last five years with at least 10 years of cumulative contribution towards the progress of science, technology and innovation (STI) through an objective, balanced and structured criteria.

The scoring mechanism was based on three criteria — knowledge generation, knowledge dissemination, and impact of research output, Unimas said in a press statement yesterday.

Balbir said it was a great honour to be recognised as one of the top research scientists in the country.

He pointed out that recognition must also go to the research team at the Malaria Research Centre, Unimas, who have worked hard to translate research ideas into publications in leading international journals.

He was grateful for their significant contributions and also for grants from Unimas, the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, and the Wellcome Trust UK that enabled research on Plasmodium knowlesi to be undertaken.

Plasmodium knowlesi is a monkey malaria parasite that was thought to rarely infect humans until Balbir's team reported in The Lancet in 2004 of a large number of human cases in the Kapit Division.

This discovery and subsequent work on clinical and epidemiological aspects of knowlesi malaria have revealed that it was widely distributed in Malaysia and other countries in Southeast Asia, and can cause deaths.

"It has resulted in P knowlesi being recognised as the fifth cause of human malaria, prompting the



GROUND-BREAKING RESEARCH: (From right) Balbir receives the award from ASM honorary fellow Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and ASM president Tan Sri Ahmad Tajuddin Ali.

World Health Organisation to convene a meeting in February 2011 to discuss the public health implications of knowlesi malaria," said the statement.

The research on knowlesi malaria conducted by staff at the Malaria Research Centre, Unimas, also received extensive international press attention from leading broadcasters including the BBC and Reuters, and was also featured in a television documentary by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The work on knowlesi malaria has impacted the way patients with this potentially fatal infection are treated and managed, particularly in Sarawak and Sabah where knowlesi malaria accounts for between 50 and 90 per cent of malaria patients at certain hospitals.

Previously, knowlesi malaria was identified and treated as the benign malariae malaria, since both species of parasites were identical under the microscope.

"But policy changes arising from the pioneering work on knowlesi malaria at Unimas have meant that these cases are being

treated and managed as for severe falciparum malaria, previously considered as the most deadly of the human malarias.

"Therefore, the research at the Malaria Research Centre, Unimas has had a significant health impact, by saving lives of people from rural communities."

The malaria research fell under one of the five Unimas niche areas including emerging tropical infectious diseases; biodiversity and environmental management; renewable energy and green technology; ICT development and ICT for development; and industrial design.

As Unimas is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, these five niche areas are seen as drivers to bring research in Unimas to greater heights.

"The drive to move forward depends very much on the research culture inculcated in every academic staff member at Unimas. Prof Balbir's success story was due to teamwork at the Malaria Research Centre and should be emulated by other research clusters in Unimas," added the statement.